

ARGUMENT

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Kyiv's Mixed Messaging Is Rooted in Domestic Worries

Ukrainians fear Washington will pressure them into accepting unwanted deals.

By Vladislav Davidzon, a writer, journalist, and artist who has reported extensively from Ukraine.

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The prolonged diplomatic standoff between Kyiv and Moscow now stretches into its third month as Russia continues to amass forces along three sides of Ukraine. While some in Kyiv and in Western intelligence services remain doubtful that the Russian army will engage in a full-scale escalation of its invasion, which has been ongoing in Eastern Ukraine and in the Crimean Peninsula since 2014, before the conclusion of the Winter Olympic Games in Beijing, a full-scale conflict is still seen as a real possibility.

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The United States, often in concert with the United Kingdom, has kept up a steady drumbeat of warnings that Moscow could quickly escalate. Open-source intelligence and social media accounts continue to disclose new movements of Russian weaponry, and large-scale military exercises are already being planned in Belarus this month.

Yet Kyiv has been in a curious conflict with its main allies, especially over the strategy pushed by Washington. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and his government have pushed back against the direst warnings of an imminent invasion emanating from the United States. The Ukrainians would prefer to see a toning down of the war rhetoric, which they view as needlessly alarmist and likely to cause a serious shock to the already shambling economy. Zelensky,

who notably waited until Jan. 20 to deliver a national address after the crisis began is attempting to taper down what Kyiv views as a spiraling narrative after his tête-à-tête with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Zelensky rebuffed U.S. President Joe Biden's comments that a major attack was imminent by reminding him that he "was the one who lived in Kyiv." That stoic response is in line with Ukrainian strategy of recent months as the Ukrainian intelligence services have repeatedly claimed in news conferences and on television shows that, even as there are indeed serious reasons to be worried, the current situation is not dire.

That has also been the position of the powerful and respected Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council chief Oleksiy Danilov, a gruff but soothing communicator who has taken to popular Ukrainian talk shows to explain that the intelligence community is vigilant but sees no reason to panic. He told the Associated Press, "The preparatory period that will be noticed by the entire world could take between three to seven days. We aren't seeing it yet. We clearly understand what's going on and we are calmly preparing for it."

There are growing worries that Washington wants to pressure Kyiv into accepting the "Steinmeier formula" proposed for implementation of the 2014 Minsk accords, or some similar measure, even if the Ukrainian people don't want it. Every Ukrainian administration has been severely constrained by public opinion on the 2016 proposal by then German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier, which outlined a sequence of implementation for both the Russians and the Ukrainians in the Donbas, the occupied region of Eastern Ukraine. These steps included a general amnesty for pro-Russian commanders who did not commit war crimes, elections under Ukrainian law, partial regional autonomy, the disarming of the separatists, and the return of the border to Ukrainian state control.

Some of these steps poll very badly with the Ukrainian public, the majority of whom is in no mood to give breaks or autonomy or forgiveness to people responsible for the death of at least 14,000 Ukrainian citizens since 2014. Zelensky came into office wanting to conclude the conflict. Yet as a native Russian speaker from the southeast, Zelensky had to spend the first year of his presidency proving his security bona fides to the population, even as his administration engaged in backchannel diplomacy with Moscow to see what sort of deal could be made.

Some Kyiv insiders and political analysts have come to view Biden and the American foreign policy establishment as engaged in a mutually reinforcing feedback loop of escalation with Russia. They see a climate that could be used to make the Zelensky administration, whose political red lines in terms of concessions on implementing the Minsk accords are set by opinion polling, make difficult concessions in future negotiations.

However, Zelensky has not been consistent in his tone over the past month. He inadvertently caused a minor firestorm when he speculated about the city of Kharkiv, located near the Russian border, potentially being taken, just as he dismisses ever more strident American warnings by saying that there “are no Russian tanks in the streets of Kyiv.”

This might seem like a strange strategy for Ukraine. But the tensions between the allies are understandable. Washington would like a diplomatic way out, but with the Kremlin unsparing and quite aggressive in its recent ratcheting up of negotiating positions and expectations from NATO and the United States, getting Kyiv to accept concessions in any negotiations, or even getting any sort of traction on the implementation of the stalled second Minsk accords, will certainly require a significant effort.

As John Herbst, former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine and senior director of the Eurasia Center at the Atlantic Council told me, “On two separate occasions President Zelensky seemed to offer concessions to Moscow. In the first instance this was accepting the ‘Steinmeier formula’ for the sequence of implementing the Minsk accords, and on another occasion in regard to the role of Moscow’s puppet leadership within the occupied territories in Eastern Ukraine. On both occasions, Zelensky was forced to reverse course after a public outcry.” Playing to a resilient and angry public at home, while not alienating allies abroad and inviting more aggression from a predatory foe, is a very difficult line to walk.

However, the seeming public differences between the approaches of the two presidents may actually work out in favor of Kyiv. As Adrian Karatnycky, a longtime Ukraine watcher who advises Ukrainian energy companies, explained to me, “The differences between Biden and Zelensky on the imminence of Russian invasion are beneficial to Ukraine. First of all, Biden’s stance is having the effect of increasing allied support for military support and also on behalf of sanctions while the demurrals of Zelensky is preventing panic and helping to keep Ukraine together.”

The international furor and the legions of foreign journalists touching down in Kyiv, as well as the weekly visits of international heads of state, arguably decrease the likelihood of a renewed Russian military operation. Ukraine also benefits from the arms flows sent by sympathetic allies, as well as the civil cohesion and state of readiness as masses of ordinary citizens join self-defense battalions and take first-aid courses.

Yet, while Kyiv certainly benefits from the deterrence generated by vigilant American rhetoric, there are serious possible blowback effects in terms of dangers to the Ukrainian economy. The Ukrainian hryvna is the weakest it has been against the dollar, pushing an exchange rate of around 28 hryvna to the dollar, after its value collapsed when the Ukrainian army was routed in open warfare against the Russian army in the run up to the second Minsk accords in early 2015. If foreign investors are easy enough to scare away, Zelensky has to consider a far wider time frame that will extend to the point when the attention of Kyiv's partners will have inevitably moved on to the next crisis.

Moscow has once again rebuffed the American security proposals, and it is difficult to see the manner in which this situation might be deescalated. While the Russian army continues to send ever more hardware to the border, Zelensky understands that the pressure campaign may well last a very long time. Kyiv is now in the midst of a war of attrition, and undue panic might very ruin the Ukrainian economy.

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